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In Memoriam
Professor John Russell Napier, M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P., D.Sc.

Professor John Napier died at his home in Mull on 29 August 1987. He was 70 years of age.

John Napier was born at the Vicarage, Old Windsor and went to school at Canford; later he entered the Medical College of St Bartholomew's Hospital and qualified in 1943. He was appointed as House Surgeon, Senior House Surgeon and Chief Assistant to the Orthopaedic Unit, Hill End Hospital (St Bartholomew's Hospital) and in 1946 was appointed Registrar to the Peripheral Nerve Injury Unit at the same hospital. He was instrumental in the establishment of this unit at the request of the Medical Research Council. In 1946 he joined the Anatomy Department of the London School of Medicine for Women (now the Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine) as a demonstrator and this was followed by a productive period at St Thomas's with Cyril Barnett under the guidance of Professor D. V. Davies.

It was at this time that his interest in the functional anatomy of the hand and foot began to develop following his clinical work with nerve injuries. After a year spent as Visiting Professor at Iowa State University he returned to the Royal Free as Reader and continued his interest in hand and foot function with papers on the prehensile movements of the human hand, the function of the carpo-metacarpal joint of the thumb, shoe wear and fibular movement.

As a result of this work he was asked by Sir Wilfred Le Gros Clark to undertake the analysis of the forelimb remains of *Proconsul africanus*, a Miocene ape recovered from Rusinga Island, Kenya, by Louis Leakey. The resulting monograph, written with Peter Davis, was a landmark in his career and established his interest in Primatology. The success of this work led to his being offered the Olduvai postcranial remains by Louis Leakey – the hand, the foot and the tibia and fibula. With typical generosity he offered the foot to me and the leg bones to Peter Davis while keeping his beloved hands for himself. The analyses of these remains led to his co-authorship with Louis Leakey and Phillip Tobias of the paper that established in 1964 *Homo habilis* as a new species of man. Only now, nearly 25 years later, is it generally recognised that this bold and controversial step was correct and that the postcranial evidence provided by John Napier and his colleagues was an important part of that taxonomic decision.

The Unit of Primatology at Royal Free, the first to be established in Britain, was set up as a result of his drive and enthusiasm and with the help of Ruth Bowden. This initiative attracted students, many of whom have gone on to distinguished careers in Primatology after his supervision. The success of the Unit led to his being invited to establish and direct the Primate Biology Program of the US National Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC. He returned to London to direct a similar unit at Queen Elizabeth College, University of London and finally to accept a Visiting Professorship of Primate Biology at Birkbeck College, University of London.

John Napier's major contributions to Anatomy and Primatology were in the field of the functional anatomy of the locomotor system in man and in the other primates. His work on prehensility and opposability led to his classification of human grips which is now universally accepted and has received that ultimate accolade of incorporation in texts without reference. Similarly, his classification of primate

locomotion is still widely used and frequently quoted in reviews as the seminal paper on the subject. His writing was not confined, however, to postcranial studies since he published, with his wife, Prue Napier, the *Handbook of Living Primates* – a foundation volume in the literature of modern Primatology that revealed the breadth of their combined knowledge of the field. Papers on palaeoecology and catarrhine evolution, the taxonomy and distribution of *Macaca mulatta*, on dental dimensions and diet in australopithecines as well as on human evolution and bipedality, further reveal the breadth of his interest in the Order to which he devoted his academic life.

John Napier was, perhaps, the first true primate biologist whose knowledge of the anatomy, ecology, distribution and behaviour of the members of the Order made him unique as a scholar in this field. He had no time or respect for bone and tooth 'measurers' who could see no further than the level of significance of their statistical results (even if they were correct) yet who knew, or wanted to know, nothing of the anatomy, behaviour or evolutionary significance of the animal or the fossil concerned.

As the founder President of the Primate Society of Great Britain he brought his knowledge of primates to bear on the organisation of the subject including the conservation of primates and their habitats, and it is largely due to him that the society that he founded has grown and now thrives.

In his later years his abilities as a lecturer and broadcaster came to fruition in a remarkable series of Royal Institution Christmas lectures that were televised in 1970/71. He was also an accomplished 'Magician' whose talents were recognised by the Magic Circle, being the Deputy Chairman of its Council in 1954. His performances were always given for charity, for student shows or just for fun. Those who were privileged to know him well will value most his originality of thought (even a brief

discussion would prompt two or three Ph.D. topics). We will miss his humour, his conversation and the delight of his companionship. His contribution to life was immense and his contribution to Anatomy and Primatology was no less great. We were lucky indeed to have in our society one of the founders of modern Primatology whose name will live as long as men contemplate their ancestry and their closest living relatives – the primates.

M. H. DAY